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Experience is the Best Teacher

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Experience Is the Best Teacher

"Experience is the best teacher" is an old adage that you can test. Ask one group of students to put together a Chinese puzzle by giving them explicit step-by-step directions and ask another group to figure out how to put the puzzle together by themselves. During the next class period ask both groups to assemble the puzzles again. The group to which you gave explicit directions will probably not be able to assemble the puzzle before the end of the class, while the other group will no doubt put it together within a few minutes.

In the former case, the students were told what to do by one person. In the latter case, the students learned by trial and error and by communicating with each other. "Learning by doing" appears to be of value for many aspects of education, so why not apply it in health education?

In teaching about community health services, or a particular disease or condition dealt with by an individual agencies, you can lecture about its role and function. You can give your students details about the disease or condition upon which the agency focuses. In this case, the students will probably take notes and give you back factual information on an exam. Much of this knowledge may be forgotten fairly quickly, and there may or may not be a change in attitude or behavior.

A more interesting alternative to this subject area is to have the students actually work at the agency. This would be "learning by doing." In my personal health classes during the past three years, my students have been given the chance to volunteer for a variety of health related community agencies giving directed service to the com-

munity. The students spend about two hours a week for one term with one organization. They are required to keep a detailed diary of their experiences. They are asked to become aware of the function of the organization and learn factual information about the disease or condition. They are encourage to express in the diary their own feelings about the people they work with and their own behavior and problems while working at the agency. The students are also asked how they feel they have grown emotionally from the experience. Thus, the students undergo a multitude of experiences and give a detailed written report on how they have gained in knowledge and changed in attitudes and behaviors.

The specific educational objectives for such a voluntary experience in a community health agency can be numerous. The personal health class students are asked to be aware of them following objectives as they undergo the experience:

1. Becoming familiar with the function and the structure of the agency.
2. Obtaining information about the particular disease or health condition dealt with by the agency.
3. Clarifying values and feelings about this condition or disease.
4. Becoming aware of responsible behavior concerning prevention of the condition.
5. Interacting with and accepting a variety of people with life styles and philosophies possibly different from themselves.
6. Enhancing self-esteem by discovering the capacity to help others.
7. Achieving individual emotional self-growth and developing the capability to undergo positive action for the improvement of our society.

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The following are excerpts from the diary of a student who was volunteering once a week in a center for mentally retarded children. These excerpts, in sequence, are examples of how the preceding objectives by the "learning by doing" method were met.

"I learned that this center is trying to train retarded kids to be able to live at home and be able to hold a simple job in a "Sheltered Workshop." Some of the children live there all the time and are also being trained to do very simple productive things. . . .

"I wasn't aware that mental retardation could be caused during pregnancy by the mother not getting treated for syphilis, because she had German measles, was over 40, or had taken drugs of some sort. I also thought that mental retardation and mental illness were the same thing. . . .

"I have always been afraid to be around or to talk to mentally retarded people. One of the things I learned was that they are very warm and friendly and do not seem to have any worries or problems at all. . . .

"When I eventually have a baby I will be sure to avoid drugs and make sure of getting regular medical exams so as to help prevent mental retardation in my children. . . .

"I am not afraid of them [mentally retarded people] anymore and really feel that I have a friendship with two of the people I visit every week. I previously felt sorry for them but maybe they should feel sorry for me. . . .

"Before I started to volunteer at the center I was afraid to do anything with people because I am very shy and am afraid of people. After working with these children I find that they and the staff like me and I feel that I am doing a good job. . . .

"This experience has really had an effect on me. After this term is over, I plan to volunteer at the center and am thinking of changing my major to education for the handicapped or exceptional children."

This example of using the "learning by doing" method appears to have met educational objectives on the knowledge, attitude, and behavior levels. Volunteering for community agencies is suitable for any grade level through graduate school and for many health related courses. Of course, the educational objectives for each type of class and the grade level will be different, and the type of agency visited or worked in by a particular class or grade level will be different. With younger children, entertaining senior citizens in nursing



homes and playing with retarded or handicapped children their own age would probably be meaningful. High school students may gain much knowledge and self-understanding by working with peers who are mentally ill or handicapped. University students in professional preparation courses can help the agency with planning pamphlets, radio spots, and other health education materials. At all grade levels, however, it is important for the instructor to discuss the objectives and ramifications of such an experience with the student. This helps the student to become aware and to gain the maximum variety of experiences from this education method.

Having students volunteer for a community health agency is an example of the "experience is the best teacher" or "learning by doing" method of education. It can be a significant educational experience for them, because it can help them become aware of the role and function of a particular health agency and aid them in learning about the disease or condition dealt with by the agency. Volunteering can assist students in clarifying their values and feelings about a particular disease or health condition. It can help them learn to accept responsibility for their own behavior in attempting to prevent the condition in themselves and others. Furthermore, this experiential method of education can facilitate the closing of the gap between the school and the community by giving the opportunity for both to communicate with each other, thereby leading to a healthy community.